

# Higher salaries might attract teachers but pay isn't one of the top 10 reasons for leaving

February 28 2022, by Hugh Gundlach, Gavin R. Slempe

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Money might at first attract us to a profession, but does it keep us in it? The report of the [Quality Initial Teacher Education Review](#), released in recent days, found teachers in Australia reach the top pay scale after

about ten years. This is well below the average for advanced economies. A survey for the review suggested [more high-achieving graduates would enter teaching](#) if the top salary increased by \$30,000.

But is [salary](#) enough to motivate people to stick with a long-term career in [teaching](#)?

We have spent the past four years working on a [meta-analysis](#) of research on this question. We analyzed over 70 factors in global data on [teacher](#) retention and turnover over the past 40 years, involving more than 3 million participants in total. We also surveyed more than 1,000 Australian current and former teachers about their career decisions.

The most-researched factors in teacher retention and turnover are job satisfaction, [school leadership](#) and teacher salary. The survey shows major attractions to teaching include:

- a passion for learning
- working with young people
- contributing to society
- job security
- salary.

Are these factors the same as the factors that keep teachers in the profession?

We statistically combined the results of 186 similar but independent studies to obtain an overall estimate of an association between a factor and teachers' decision to stay or leave the profession. This approach corrects for bias that may be present in individual studies to reveal the true strength of relationships.

## **What keeps teachers in the profession?**

Our meta-analysis showed salary has the third-strongest association with teacher retention. It came behind teachers' self-reported commitment to the profession and self-reported [job satisfaction](#).

In our survey, salary ranked fourth for reasons teachers stay in the profession. The first three reasons were positive student relationships, positive collegiate relationships and secure employment.

One teacher with 12 years' experience reflected: "The most significant factor I have perceived in keeping teachers in our profession is their personal passion. Teachers are not materially motivated, there are no big dollars here. Good schools then necessarily rely on passion to outweigh these priorities in retaining and developing excellent teachers."

Another teacher with 18 years' experience said: "The thing that has kept me in teaching is the students I teach, the relationships I have with them, and the sense that I am contributing to making their lives better in some way."

## **Any why do others leave teaching?**

When surveyed about why teachers leave, salary did not feature in the top ten reasons. A loss of passion for teaching, stress and burnout, struggling to cope with their roles and a lack of connection with students were the most common reasons.

For those who leave, salary has a relatively weak association. It seems important for stayers, but won't stop leavers from leaving.

As one participant in the survey said: "I think the pressure, stress and workload, paired with the salary teachers receive, ultimately means you must have a real passion for the job to survive. As soon as that passion

fades, it can become incredibly arduous, you can feel unappreciated, and you can become resentful. It is important to continually assess why you are teaching and what makes you love the job, as without that love for the work you do, the profession can be a nightmare."

## **Showing teachers they are valued does matter**

A \$30,000 pay rise for every teacher at the top experience level would of course be popular. It would show their experience is valued. One teacher with ten years' experience said: "I find it really frustrating that I work hard but am not financially rewarded. I look at my friends earning twice the amount and experiencing more recognition for jobs that are merely about economic benefit. I know my job is important but I would like more prestige in society's eyes."

Raising the top salary for teachers, even if only a fraction of recruits last long enough to receive it, may help to raise the status in society and social approval among friends and family of teaching. These two factors had strong associations with intentions to stay in the profession.

The prime target of raising the top salary would be teachers under 40 years old. A [recently published report](#) on the characteristics of teachers in the workforce found teachers under 40 were much less likely (about 20%) to indicate an intention to stay in the profession until retirement.

One teacher commented: "The public service get much more money, for much less work and far fewer qualifications. The value and worth of the teaching profession do not reflect well."

Three charts on teachers' pay in Australia

<https://t.co/ZVd3pvMVGx>

Saying our teachers are well paid is only half the story—they may start that way, but that's not where they end up. [#education](#)

[#teacher pic.twitter.com/WnWpFzxaDD](https://twitter.com/WnWpFzxaDD)

— Lesley Wright, Ph.D (@LesleyWrites) [September 15, 2019](#)

Our study data suggest teachers leave for a combination of greater pay and benefits and professional growth. One teacher told us: "I value opportunities and recognition. When you hear about friends who work for exciting firms that offer opportunities, perks and flexibility, the school environment can feel rigid."

The structure of tenure-based salary advancement is potentially a limiting factor compared to other industries. A 49-year-old teacher with five years' experience said: "I had to take a huge pay cut to move from the corporate sector into education. I never expected to be confronted with such an inequitable system. Pay based on years of experience rather than merit and ability has been very demotivating."

## **Staffing schools is a delicate balancing act**

Retention in itself should not be a school goal at the expense of student learning or rejuvenation of teaching staff through new hires. Indeed, teachers are not exactly a homogeneous workforce.

Unfair as it may be, should bonuses be offered to retain teachers in hard-to-staff subjects and locations only?

A \$30,000 increase in the salary ceiling may retain long-serving staff, but what effect would \$30,000 spent to reduce workload and improve resources and working conditions for all teachers have on retention?

Ensuring Australia has a sufficient supply of qualified and motivated teachers requires a two-pronged approach: attraction and retention.

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Provided by The Conversation

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